

Portraiture as Social Commentary

Joakim Eskildsen | Paweł Książek | Zofia Kulik | Milja Laurila | Dominik Lejman |
Jorma Puranen

Opening: Friday, 17 November 2023, 6 – 8 pm

Exhibition: 18 November 2023 – 27 January 2024

Zofia Kulik,
Land-Escape I, 2001
180 x 150 cm



Persons Projects is delighted to present the latest group exhibition titled *Portraiture as Social Commentary*; this exhibition not only highlights the different aspects of the genre but also links together a variety of artistic perspectives. A portrait is a painting, a photograph, a sculpture, or any other representation of a person in which the face and its expressions are predominant. They reveal the presence of the subject viewed from the perspective of the artist – a merger of contrasts between what's projected by one and perceived by another. These images become mirrors of many faces that reflect both the political and cultural undercurrents relevant to the time period in which they were conceived.

The photographs of Zofia Kulik are produced as photomontages, using multiple exposures placed on photo paper through precisely cut masks. In this way, one work can consist of even a hundred single images. Within the realm of the self-portrait, Zofia Kulik presents herself as a queen. Her kingdom lies in the empire of a photographic archive, a collection made up of preserved or frozen gestures and motifs, a kingdom of ornaments in which forms are constantly repeated and pictures are rhythmically unravelled in time. Zofia Kulik started to produce self-portraits after 1987. They came, as a manifestation of an awakening of identity as an artist. Along with this self-portrait justification came the ornament, which served as a way for Zofia Kulik to untangle her vision of history, politics, and art.

In the series *N.N. vs. Artists*, Paweł Książek intertwines a collection of diverse narratives by accumulating sources through an archive of online images of anonymous people and performance art. This impression is reinforced in these artistically transposed images through references to art history and performative practices from the 1960s and 70s, such as Vienna Actionism. This weaving together of various thoughts and concepts becomes paramount in the creation of non-linear tales that explore ecstasy, anarchy, and existentialism. The vast series questions authorship and censorship, as references of performance art are spliced with found internet images that are in some way inadvertently interconnected, either visually or conceptually. These large paintings portray people with a scrawling of paint, clouding parts of the subject from view. In the twisting of truth, the distinction between “real” and “unreal” often becomes blurred in Książek’s pieces as elements are manipulated, retouched, and compiled, leaving almost everything open to interpretation and teetering on the edge of fantasy.

In the series titled *Shadows, Reflections, and All That Sort of Thing*, Jorma Puranen photographs historical portrait paintings from unusual and unfamiliar angles. Rather than making a connection between the portrayed and a specific landscape, Puranen leaves the paintings in place on the museum walls and photographs them under curious conditions. The resulting photographic portraits defy the accepted standards of a well-made photo. The daylight is reflected on the surface of the painting, overexposing certain parts of the

image, and obliterating others in darkness. The series questions the relationships between the portrait, the portrayed, the photograph of the portrait, and how the employed mediums influence our perception of them as an “image”. Jorma Puranen, one of the leading conceptual artists using photography as their medium in the Nordic region, has played a pivotal role in the creation of the Helsinki School while being a practicing artist for the past four decades.

Joakim Eskildsen’s work throughout his career has consistently focused on his relationship with his subjects in their natural environment, reflecting not only their culture but also their way of life. His methodology is to submerge himself into their daily lives for extended periods of time to capture their patterns of living, their hopes and disappointments, and most importantly to share in the understanding of who they actually are. In the moment of capturing a portrait, the ever-present existence of social context aids in uncovering the true essence of the subject. In presenting them in their own lives and with their own communities, we see them for who they truly are. His photographic images reflect his unique sense and style for storytelling and how we as a universal culture can visualize humanity on the most basic level. Eskildsen is one of the most published artists from the Helsinki School and has been seen on the covers of *Time* to the *New York Times Magazine*.

In this selected work by Dominik Lejman, the blend of painting and projection creates an ephemeral ghostly scene with a formal resemblance to the baroque genre. The painted chiaroscuro canvas stands alone, its darkened textures becoming the perfect backdrop for a video projection. In this work, performer Bianca O’Brien fluidly moves and interacts with the space, reflecting her own character and personality while languidly perched in the style of a traditional portrait. The contrast between classical presentation with her contemporary movements emphasizes the innovative hybrid form of canvas painting and projectible technology while depicting parts of the model’s true self. At moments she stares straight through the canvas, piercing its fabric with her eyes as they stare straight into your own. As the film loop comes to its completion, she begins to unwrap her headpiece and her form descends into darkness leaving nothing but the blackened canvas.

Milja Laurila’s *Untitled Women* series uses the 1930s book titled *Woman. An Historical Gynaecological and Anthropological Compendium* as a point of departure. Originally published in German in 1885 and written by three men, the book is illustrated with hundreds of photographs of naked women and children from all over the world, primarily from colonized countries. The cross between anthropology, racism, and sexism, come together to create an uncomfortable viewing experience that claims to be “scientific.” The photographed women have no voice, as they are presented as “exotic” specimens found in nature. In using translucent paper to cover parts of the original photos, making only the eyes visible and obscuring the body, she flips the notion of gaze. Laurila turns the focus away from the male scientists hailed as heroes to the forgotten women who were no more than objects of research, stripped of their respect, as well as their dignity. Her photographs raise the question of who is the spectator versus the spectacle, and how we see to be seen.

Summertale, the final piece in Kozyra’s series *In Art Dreams Come True*, consists of 13 videos of performances, quasi-theatrical productions, and audience-engaging happenings. The photograph, that was taken during the project, depicts Kozyra as a fairy-tale figure of a woman who is “bound” by the symbolic cultural norms that refer to gender and a woman’s position in society. Kozyra wakes up the discussion on what it means to be a woman in today’s world. Her works challenge the fundamentals of how society judges and perceives a woman’s role in how she exhibits herself in whatever endeavor she chooses. This work contributed to Kozyra’s international recognition, which set the tone for her work of taboo nudity gender expectation etc. As a recipient of Honorable Mention at the 1999 Venice Biennale, she received international recognition for her work *Men’s Bathhouse*.